



Students produce album to benefit victims of Sudan crisis

By Dan Bobkoff

Features Editor

All it took was the entrepreneurship of four Wesleyan students, the backing of an ice cream icon and the support of the leading music download service. Together, this eclectic group hopes to raise more than \$100,000 in aid for the humanitarian crisis in Sudan through sales of their new charity album.

So far, it's working.

Eric Herman '05, Jesse Brenner '05, David Ahl '05 and Adam Tuck '05 recently pooled their connections, interest in African music and artistic talents to create "ASAP: The Afrobeat Sudan Aid Project," a 12-track CD and digitally downloadable album featuring multiple Afrobeat musicians. All proceeds from the CD and download sales go to Oxfam-affiliated "Kebkayiah Smallholders Charitable Society," which provides food and shelter to Sudanese refugees.

Afrobeat is an upbeat, danceable, politicized music originating in Nigeria.

Herman and Brenner gained the trust of the Afrobeat community to convince artists to donate their songs. Herman, who served as project coordinator, co-

produced the album with Ahl and Brenner. Ahl mixed the album and Tuck created the album artwork.

The students attracted the interest of Ben Cohen, best known as the Ben of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. Cohen now runs the activist organization, TrueMajority. The group is helping fund the project and convinced Apple Computer to offer the album pro bono on its popular iTunes Music Store.

The online service featured the album, the first and only charity album offered on the service, on its front page for more than a week. Apple agreed to waive their fees so the entire \$9.99 cost is donated to charity.

It was the number 25 most downloaded album for about four days.

"That's absolutely remarkable for a world music album," Herman said.

Currently, the album is the number 93 most downloaded album. The success should continue as more stories about the album appear in the press. The project has been written up in The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Hartford Courant, BusinessWeek Online and many websites for Macintosh enthusiasts. The producers say they even saw it mentioned in a weblog from Germany.

The album is the result of Herman and Brenner's interest in Africa and Afrobeat. Brenner spent the fall of his junior year in Botswana, while Herman spent the same semester in Mali.

Herman and Brenner, friends since the beginning of freshman year, were inspired while working together last summer.

"Jesse and I interned all summer for Afrobeat Worldwide," Herman said. "When Darfur became more visible, we put two and two together and realized we could undergo a project with Afrobeat artists."

The two had met performers, producers, promoters and publicists. They were also forming their own record company, Modiba Productions, and the two rushed to incorporate so that they could produce this album.

"The connections we made in New York were invaluable," Herman said.

Brenner said Afrobeat was a great fit for the project.

"Afrobeat is an inherently politically and socially minded music," Brenner said.

They point to the founder of Afrobeat, Fela Kuti, who is quoted as saying, "Music is the weapon of the future."

"Fela identified music as the weapon of the future because it's a communication channel—a forum for ideas—that resonates in much deeper levels of consciousness than regular discourse," Herman said. "Music is the most emotive, expressive and appealing method we have to communicate, and therefore the most powerful."

Tuck said the album is a great way to transmit information about the crisis. The album jacket and some of the songs themselves contain information about Sudan.

“People do have a resistance to just giving money,” Tuck said.

Luckily for them, two thirds of the material was already done before they even made their proposal. Many of the artists are underground and some of the tracks were previously unreleased.

“We’re also trying to promote the artists because they’re giving this to us for free,” Ahl said.

Ahl mixed the album together, and, to one song added audio clips from the group, CARE, Amnesty International and Eric Reeves, a Sudan expert and professor at Smith College.

“Part of the challenge was mixing the music, selecting the right songs and making them flow together,” Ahl said.

The students could have selected better-known music from popular performers, but said they are proud of the success they have achieved using less well-known African artists.

“There’s a real difference between what we’re doing here and your more common charity album,” Brenner said. “We’re using African voices. Their voices are being heard too.”

The project has excited Wesleyan’s only Sudanese student.

“I’m glad that there is somebody doing stuff--somebody who is really interested,” said Lagu Androga ’07, who comes from southern Sudan. “Whenever genocide is occurring, it’s everybody’s responsibility. It’s something that can happen anywhere.”

The album creators owe much of their success to Aaron Thaler ’05. Thaler’s father has been close friends with Ben & Jerry’s Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield since the three grew up together in Merick, NY. Thaler interned at TrueMajority last summer. When Brenner and Ahl presented their idea to Thaler, he immediately passed it on to Cohen.

“Right away, Ben was ecstatic about it,” Thaler said. “From that point on, Modiba and TrueMajority worked together on its production.”

Thaler is impressed with the results.

“I dig the ASAP project,” he said. “The founders of Modiba all treasure music as the centerpiece of their lives. Now they utilize it as an amazing political force.”

The creators also credit University President Doug Bennet and University public relations officer David Pesci for helping them gain publicity.

“[Bennet] gave it enough consideration to make sure it gets attention outside of Wesleyan,” Tuck said.

The album combines the power of the Internet as a rallying and distribution medium. Herman said this could be a model for other Wesleyan students.

“We want to inspire people to look at activism as not just an intellectual exercise on campus, but to pull up your sleeves and get active in the real world,” he said.

Brenner added, “I think protests are important, but it’s also important to do constructive things too.”

With their swift success, the students are staying remarkably levelheaded.

“It’s kind of a humbling experience,” Brenner said. “But it’s also empowering when we see all the people come out and support the project.”

More information is available at www.modiba.net and www.truemajority.org. The album can be downloaded at the iTunes Music Store.